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ABSTRACT

Four years ago, the Colorado education system embarked on a course to downsize central offices in response to calls for accountability and site-based decision making. This paper presents findings of a study that examined restructuring and downsizing in four Colorado school districts. One consequence of downsizing was a reduction in force at the district administrative level. Data were gathered through document analysis and interviews with central-office and school personnel. The study found that school districts chose a variety of strategies in response to pressure to balance their budgets: (1) picking up "loose change"; (2) controlling budgets more tightly; (3) right-sizing the central office while "holding classrooms harmless"; (4) impacting the classrooms; (5) reincorporating necessary areas into the budgets; and (6) transforming central-office roles and functions. District personnel initially experienced short-term euphoria, which was followed by disillusionment, role confusion, burnout, and attempts to cope. To establish best practices, districts should develop a comprehensive and less reactive strategy; consider the human toll; differentiate between centralization and downsizing; and focus on developing a systemic capacity. (Contains 10 references.) (LMI)

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Downsizing of Central Office: Does Anyone Care?

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Introduction

Recently, a phenomenon known as "downsizing" has been popularized as central to the restructuring of education. Downsizing, a buzzword adopted from corporate America, refers to "reducing the number of employees through attrition or layoffs, in an effort to operate within a target budget" (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1/27/95). In education this reduction of force is focused on district level administration and is often accompanied by restructuring efforts involving the realignment or adjusting of job responsibilities and the concomitant reexamination of leadership challenges. In our research we have found "downsizing" to be a response to demands for fiscal accountability and resulted in devolution of tasks and responsibilities to school sites. However, the relationship between this destabilized environment at central office and the improvement of teaching and learning remains spurious at best.

The downsizing phenomenon is not new to educators, however, in the main it goes undiscussed and unreported. Not so for business. Downsizing has occurred on a massive scale in American corporations. Five of every six companies have downsized in the past decade according to a Laborforce 2000 study, and according to the July 6, 1994, Wall Street Journal "corporate downsizings have failed to produce what was expected." An American Management Association Study (1994) found that two-thirds of companies that downsized one year did it again the next year because the process set off a downward spiral of reduced sales and profits." Business and industry are acknowledging that corporate downsizing has its repercussions noting the need to revitalize downsized organizations, where "lean and mean (has led) to sad and angry" employees at all levels of the organization (Noer, 1993).

In school districts, central offices are a favorite political target. Often seen as the obstacle between effective schools and failing schools, central offices have been termed "bloated," "costly," "tradition-bound," and "bureaucratic." Thus, it is here that the downsizing phenomenon has struck in educational organizations. An especially "heavy toll on organizational effectiveness and employee well-being" has lead in some instances, to the onset of what has been termed "corporate anorexia" (Marks, 1993). While this phenomenon is being examined in business and industry, educators have yet to deal forthrightly with the human and organizational impacts of the downsizing process. An occasional voice acknowledges the "volcanic eruption of resentment" (Tewel, 1995) among district level professionals as they experience their reinvented functions in the aftermath of the restructuring that either precedes or follows downsizing. Warnings that "no one can run an effective school district

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if every school... becomes a system unto itself" (Steller, 1995) occasionally surface. But if one were to judge by attention paid, the downsizing of central office would seem non-existent.

In our state, downsizing of central offices has been the response to the twin desires to be fiscally accountable while moving the locus of decision making to school sites. One consequence is a reduction in force focused on district level administration. In order to better understand how restructuring and downsizing of school district central offices evolves we engaged in a multi-year study of selected school districts.¹ The primary study sites, four medium sized school districts in Colorado which have been under pressure to downsize for several years in succession. Annual budget cuts, increasing enrollments without parallel increases in funding, stability in the position of superintendent, and boards which have not been taken over by extreme conservative elements characterize these districts.

The study methods have centered around reviewing documents and interviewing personnel in the central office and in schools. In addition to the superintendent, other central office administrators, certificated staff and support staff have been interviewed. At the school sites interviewing has targeted principals, assistant principals and office staff. In addition to interviews, planning documents and related office memoranda as well as reports in the media, have been compiled and reviewed.

Much of what is reported below exemplifies initial and early-on reaction to the downsizing phenomenon. However, four years after the initial impact of the "mean and lean" mandate the researchers visited again with key informants. While "involuntary worker sacrifice" has been ebbing, there remain many reverberations for those early survivors and their organizations. These longer term reactions are also discussed below.

Evolution: A Pattern of Strategic Options

As one would expect, there are a variety of strategies that the study school districts have chosen in responding to pressure to balance their budgets and to address public demands for a "leaner" central office. In selecting a strategy there are a number of factors to consider, such as how long is the situation likely to last, where can the loss be felt the least, what would be likely impacts on classrooms, and how will it be perceived. One tendency has had unforeseen consequences is for districts to delay cutting the two areas which have the most significant effect on the district's budget, pupil/teacher ratio and teacher pay.

We have observed that there is a fairly standard and, in hind sight, predictable sequence to the options selected. One of the more adventuresome strategies would be to immediately transform key

¹Portions of study findings were published earlier in The School Administrator, June, 1996.

structures and functions. This approach would begin by examining what currently is done, deliberately abandoning some things and developing entirely new and different ways of staffing and operating. But transforming at the strategic level only occurred in one of the study districts, and then it was employed in only a few areas. Instead, the districts we studied instituted an evolutionary set of tactics on an annual basis as budget and public pressures continued. What follows are brief descriptions of these strategies, along with example tactics used to realize each. We then note the most current iteration of the downsizing challenge and propose a number of "best practices" for the long term.

Strategy 1: Picking Up "Loose Change." Typically the first strategy employed was a review of all accounts. Districts often, through their fiscal services staff, conducted systematic search for unspent dollars from the previous six months to two years. A district internal audit group might be established to comb every line item for potential savings which could result in little or no change in actual service delivery. The decision then followed that those areas were not in need of the unspent funds. However, since 85% of most districts' budgets are spent on wages and benefits for staff, usually the "loose change" fund is small in total and is good for a one-year effect only.

Tactics: Maintenance budgets which often contain budgeted dollars for several snow days, boiler/HVAC breakdowns, and potential utility rate increases were combed. One district found \$900,000 in unspent special education accounts, \$450,000 in transportation, and \$300,000 in maintenance, all of which could be used to balance the budget with no service level reduction.

Strategy 2: Tighter Budget Control. Strategy 1 is followed closely by implementation of new budgeting systems and procedures. In this phase managers are asked to find ways to save dollars but leave services intact. Tactics used here include purchasing new computer and reporting systems, and implementing revised accounting procedures in an effort to gain tight control over spending. Improved systems to keep track of when funds are encumbered and spent are also incorporated. One result is up-to-date and accurate to the minute budget reports for administrators and the board. "There sure won't be anymore accounts with large sums of unspent money in them."

Tactics: One district hired a comptroller from business as a new assistant superintendent for finance. This person was expected to introduce a tight fiscal control system. Funds made available to sites were targeted and the newly established budget management system kept careful control over how funds were spent. Impact was considered minimal. Tactics included watering and fertilizing only grounds in front of the school and on play fields. In several districts' staff development budgets were prioritized and only Priority I training was funded. Bus stops can be consolidated, computerized transportation scheduling implemented to minimize route miles, and automated telephone systems installed, all in an effort to cover tasks with fewer support personnel.

Strategy 3: Rightsizing the Central Office, while "Holding the Classrooms Harmless." Once surpluses have been wrung out and a general tightening or leaning of services has occurred real cuts have to be made. After much discussion and an elaborate process of involving stakeholders in

planning, the usual step is to cut the size of the central office. In one district, although the student population had grown significantly, there are nearly fifty percent fewer administrators in the central office today as compared with ten years ago. In this strategy, as occurred in business, "rightsizing" really means "downsizing."

Tactics: Include encouraging early retirements, reducing contracts from twelve to ten months, not filling positions, assigning additional professional duties to the remaining certificated personnel, increasing the responsibilities of long term classified staff, privatizing support services, soliciting volunteers, and creating myths which honor super human efforts on the part of remaining personnel.

In one district, when the district director of athletics retired, under the mantle of "empowerment" a twenty year veteran senior secretary assumed most of the responsibilities. In another district benefits administration was contracted to a third party. A district where burgeoning student enrollment accounted for numerous teaching applicants, a centralized procedure employing sophisticated screening processes was eliminated. Principals and staff, as part of "decentralization," now have the direct responsibility to recruit and select staff members

Strategy 4: Impacting the Classroom. If the downsizing pressures continue than following Strategy 3 there is no choice but to make decisions that will directly impact classrooms. For a number of reasons we believe this strategy should be implemented sooner than later. When this strategy is considered, we have found a hierarchy of common cuts which affect the classroom.

Level I - these cuts include freezing or decreasing funds for materials, supplies, texts and staff attendance at conferences. If teacher aides are present, their positions are eliminated or cut back to cover only essential supervision duties.

Level II - increases in pupil/teacher ratios. This not only results in larger classes (25-30 elementary, 30-35+ secondary), but also the elimination of special or low enrollment classes.

Level III - salary negotiations target salary freezes or actual salary rollbacks. While one year freezes in salary were common place, no district actually rolled back salaries. Also common was a freeze in base pay only allowing teachers to continue to get raises for a year's experience or additional education hours.

Tactics: One district eliminated all classes with enrollments of less than 15 students. Advanced placement classes, however, were preserved to afford more students the opportunity of passing advanced placement tests to gain college equivalency credit. At the elementary level, this same district eliminated instrumental music but maintained art, music and PE as they provide planning time for regular classroom teachers. Another tactic, decentralize substitute teacher budgets with incentives to discourage sub-day usage.

Strategy 5: Finessing Back-In the Necessary. Sometime after Strategy 3 or by the time Strategy 4 is being implemented the facts are faced in central office that "perhaps we cut too far in some areas." In this strategy a few of the functions and/or roles that were reduced or eliminated are added back in. However, the case can still be made that there will be budget savings, since any new people hired will be contracted at lower salary and/or benefits level and assume more tasks. A related

tactic is to bring back "retired" administrators on a per diem contract, to do specific tasks, e.g. coaching a first year principal who is in trouble, or facilitating a particular planning effort focused on an immediate dilemma such as the need for a comprehensive district discipline code. Another tactic at this juncture is for the districts to "go political." For example, one district worked with their state legislators to modify the state school finance systems in ways that would get the district increased revenue.

Tactics: Political tactics brought forth a coalition of lowest spending districts to argue their case of equity. Another coalition of districts, heavily impacted by low socioeconomic status pleaded their case on greater student need. Another group labeled "hold harmless" districts built the case that they had received no per pupil funding increases for several years. The effect of going political was a rewrite of the state school finance laws so that some districts gained at the expense of others. To the benefit of all, per pupil funding was increased 2% for FY 1995-96.

Strategy 6: Transformations. If there is going to be a multi-year need to reduce the budget, then it appears to be wise to earlier, rather than later, engage in the strategy of transforming how the central office does its business. We do mean transforming. Thought needs to be given to how to reconceptualize the roles and functions of the central office. Thought also needs to be given to which functions and roles will be dropped. Based on the assumption that nearly all of the personnel in a school district central office are overworked already, with diminished operating resources it is not possible "to do more with less." New ways of organizing to do what is most important need to be conceived and implemented.

Tactics: One study district developed a new role, building resource teacher (BRT). The BRT is assigned to each elementary and secondary school with the sole function of instructional leadership, including mentoring new teachers, staff development and other related functions. They are to accomplish, in each school, the earlier functions which were being done by a cadre of traveling central office consultants

Human Cost

Implications for personnel, both at the district office and school site take two diverse forms. Central office administrators have watched any number of colleagues become peripheral or passe. Promptings to early retirement coupled with reframing tasks and responsibilities and finally filling positions with volunteers, part-timers or young professionals who accept half pay for 1 ½ times the work load, demands of those who remain a new relationship with the organization. The developed culture of belonging and commitment are badly strained. Some see the golden ring of opportunity in the reconfigured job responsibilities. District administrators say it is "overwhelming and a compliment." Some principals feel "freed" and exhilarated by the new power and potential. Others scurry about in efforts to compete and not be found wanting. Most principals interviewed felt deserted, "lacking support" and "vulnerable." A response to an environment that appears to hold no loyalties.

In the districts we have studied the initial belief that one round of downsizing would suffice has, as corporate experience supports, not proven true. In fact, the bleeding occurs for two and sometimes three years, and if job titles have disappeared the responsibilities of those positions have not. In more than fifteen interviews with central office personnel in four districts, a consistent pattern of reactions to the experience with downsizing emerges.

Euphoria

A short term and initial reaction involves the creation of a superman/wonder woman mythology. There is a heightened sense of capacity in being everything to everyone. A "can-do" attitude seems to prevail. There is the superintendent's secretary who is delivering student suspension letters on her way home in the evening; the assistant superintendent who arrives before 5:00 AM to plow the school driveway; the principal who feels "free," released from supervision, able to make more decisions. There exists a kind of euphoria, joy even, at discovering how much they can keep afloat working ten to fifteen hour days. The myth is perpetuated in a variety of ways:

"For two years we were all out three nights a week and worked Saturdays. Some Saturdays you'd find a long line at the copy machine. It's exhilarating."

"It's overwhelming and a compliment that they think you can do so much."

"The quality of relationships principals now have with their teams (because district administrators are no longer there)... everyone pitches in."

As more and more of one's sense of efficacy is eroded by overwhelming professional responsibilities, euphoria gives way to a sense of overextension and a resultant concern about how well one is meeting both professional and personal commitments. Typical is the assistant superintendent whose supervisory responsibilities three years earlier included 15 area principals. In year two of the restructuring effort his supervisory responsibilities doubled as he was now charged with mentoring all the district's elementary principals. Three years after downsizing of central office began, he is the sole supervisor for the district's full complement of over 40 site administrators. This administrator finds that coping with extensive demands requires an ever growing reliance on technology. The cellular phone to return calls and deal with emergencies while in transit; the mini-recorder constantly at the ready for stray and not so stray thoughts; morning and evening time devoted to answering E-mail; and the ubiquitous beeper. These devices, he notes, go everywhere with him "even the bathroom." Unless a principal is in trouble, one on one informal communication is brief and rare. Responses at this point include:

"We have 20 supervisors for 600 staff. I can't convey what it feels like to know there are needs out there (and) I'm not able to respond."

"There's a reason no one says it is not working- fear. A lot of good people aren't here any more."

A Profound Shift

As fewer and fewer staff are given ever increasing responsibility there is an unanticipated and underestimated consequence. Euphoria diminishes, the flattening of the bureaucracy continues and more and more nodes of power develop. Negotiating these multiple channels is disquieting and time consuming. There is a blurring of roles and a confusion as to responsibilities. As example, there is the assistant superintendent now supervising 45 principals (the same administrator who, in the past, supervised 15 and then 30), the former high school athletic director who, as a result of downsizing, is now accountable for the full district athletic program, the assistant superintendent for instruction who has no curriculum specialists to enlist in support. These professionals know full well the unmet needs of the individuals and programs which look to them for a variety of services. They also know they can not deliver fully in these areas. Ironically their offices are often retitled "Support Services."

These administrators have watched the changing employment profile in the district office. Retirements, layoffs, the shift from full time to part time roles, the reconfiguring of titles and responsibilities to accommodate new employees at substantially lower pay, and the expansion of their own responsibilities into areas requiring new skills. In at least one instance volunteers have been solicited to provide expertise or simply an extra pair of hands. The psychological fallout is palpable:

"(District administrators know) if you can't do it all, 'get out' "

"A decision gets made at central and we (principals) are asked to implement it. But there's no one there to help, to question..."

"The task load is frustrating. We're all going in different directions...we're constantly asked to leave the buildings."

"We are for sure abusing loyal (classified) employees who are working harder and receiving no raises."

Coping

The job, often devoid of critical long term planning, becomes one of dealing with crisis as they arise. Allegiances based on long term employment practices are seen as expendable. A paradigm shift of some magnitude has occurred and the coping struggles of the professionals and staff at central office are largely ignored. Entering year three several interviews provoked respondents to note that they would do what they are asked although they now recognize they can not do all that is expected.

One coping mechanism was that of altering vacation schedules. "I can never get away for a week straight. Instead I try to take Friday and occasional Mondays and string together a few days

away from the office. But the computer and the phone are always there." Two districts have brought back retirees on temporary and part time assignment to provide missing expertise at substantially reduced cost. In at least one district in our study a semblance of normalcy appears to have returned to central office after four years of leaning. "People" we are told "have adjusted to the work load. It (new working conditions) is a fait accompli" suggests the director of human resources. Yet another district, after four years of an exploding student population, zero district level administrative growth, and a four or five night a week meeting schedule, has begun to add personnel. While in the same time frame, one district still allots tasks on a project basis with responsibility resting with staff rather than line personnel. They regard this as temporary believing that the last year or two (or three or four) has been an aberration.

Principals acknowledge feeling challenged to meet their roles in relation to teaching and learning when central office tasks, functions and services have been moved out to the sites. The majority of site-based administrators we spoke with feel "hammered," comment on being bombarded by issues while having "lost the charge." Although they still sense the mission there is an equally palpable feeling of desertion. Central office's message is "we've empowered you, so handle it." Some practitioners and researchers are noting an erosion of broad-based equity as policy makers sanction "every tub on its on bottom." Compliance mandates, particularly the related paperwork, are not always getting addressed.

From district office to school site, athletic office to the bus garage, there is a sense of things being out of control." While acknowledging a growing emphasis on creativity and efficiency the question being raised appears to be "when, in the name of efficiency, do you become inefficient." In the long term, several questions arise. When does the euphoria of feeling super-able turn to burnout? Will there be more litigation due to overlooked procedures? Will the organization be left with no internal memory as survivors retire? What, over time, will be the organizational cost of "reduction of central office funding?"

Future Downsizing: Considerations for Establishing Best Practices

In our study districts, the latest round of demands for greater efficiency has not been targeted central office. In fact, in one district an independent evaluation suggested that a number of central office roles should be reinstituted, most prominently, curriculum direction and public relations. Has the call for "mean and lean" simply gone away? Does the public no longer perceive education as "top-heavy?" Doubtful! In one study district, which has been painfully downsized over the past five years, dialogue concerning appropriations for new school space has just begun. One letter to the editor of the local newspaper suggested that "administrative offices be vacated so that something more useful... could be achieved with the added space." Once again, the diminishment of district offices is offered as a potential panacea for fiscal difficulties. Vice-President Gore, substituting for the President at his weekly Saturday address, spoke of education on March 15, 1997. He noted, fervently, that efforts at improvement need to be concentrated on "teachers and the classroom while reducing bureaucratic bloat."

We anticipate that school districts everywhere will endlessly wrestle with demands for greater efficiency and fairness. At the same time, we reject the idea that central office is irrelevant. Moreover, we assert that it is backwards looking to put every ship (school) on its own bottom and anticipate that equality of opportunity will occur, school to school. Only temporary appeasement of demands will occur by cutting central office. Education policy makers may be misguided in their fascination with strategies of the corporate world, still, Peter Drucker's commentary on corporate downsizing, "seeing way too many amputations before the diagnosis," should be considered. Before the next "reengineering" round a proactive and strategically-driven arrangement must be devised; one which seeks to build capacity and attends to the consequences of the organization's approach to devolving authority and/or downsizing. We suggests several critical considerations when managing a downsizing organization:

Assess Critical Functions

While each of the study districts has added or added-back personnel central to the functioning of the district, this restructuring resembles a shell game. Titles have not necessarily been reconstituted but there has been a growth of "transitional" roles, reconfiguration of departments to assure jobs get done, and outright reexamination and reestablishment of previously cut departments and positions. Public relations and curriculum positions are two such. The former, decimated in the first rounds of downsizing, was determined to be essential as a protracted "bleeding" of personnel appeared not to appease the critics. The necessity of assuring continuous and consistent communication to a variety of publics could not be well sustained by part time or novice employees. In the face of the loss of familiar personnel, and the resultant welter of confusion concerning roles and responsibilities, "spin control" became an essential function. The recentralization of curricular responsibilities is primarily the result of current state mandates around curricular and assessment standards. Viewed as functionally impossible to decentralize, one district metes out ad hoc district-wide curriculum responsibility to principals. Another has reconfigured and retitled the previous role of the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction. Thus, they achieve district continuity and support around this area and avoid the appearance of adding an administrator.

Prior to a downsizing initiative an opportunity to re-visit core values needs to be provided. It is critical to clarify vision and mission. Before roles and tasks are assigned to sites and /or central office, districts must identify non-negotiables and determine the critical functions which should be sustained. These need to be focused from the outset by both the kind of support schools need and want and the fiscal accountability tax payers demand. Some implications from our study:

- A comprehensive and less reactive strategy is highly encouraged. Leaders must start by recognizing that attention to the urgent rarely replaces longer term planning focused by the important. A piecemeal, or incremental approach is neither appropriate or useful. A better plan will consider:

- critical functions first
 - sensible placement of tasks and responsibilities second
 - provisions for consistency across schools and over time
 - communication to all stakeholders through a strategically considered media plan
 - construction of a budget which considers both elimination of positions and the support necessary for transfer of job responsibilities
- Span of control seems easy to compromise and difficult to renegotiate. A single assistant superintendent being responsible, as direct supervisor, for thirty five or forty principals is blatantly irresponsible. It has proven, in our study districts, unworkable at every level. The persistence of this organizational structure is perpetuated, in one district, by a "continuing reluctance to increase administrators at the district level." According to one district administrator whose job was created in the after shock of the first two waves of cuts, "this has left us with a cabinet way too small for a healthy district."
- People with critical skills often take advantage of early retirement offers made to effectuate cost containment. While cutting unnecessary personnel is compelling vindication for the whole business of downsizing, jobs are rarely eradicated and organizational effectiveness may be severely impaired while less expensive, less skilled personnel attempt to fill vacancies.
- The establishment of a long-range plan, needs to include capacity building initiatives. The acknowledgment of an increasing need for diversification and generalization among personnel, particularly those who may be encouraged to assume new responsibilities, can help off set the otherwise inevitable gaps in proffered services.

Consider the Human Toll

- Preparing people for change acknowledges the human side of downsizing. How released workers are treated sticks in the minds of organization survivors. "A forward looking human resource orientation is needed to retain and motivate downsizing survivors" (Marks, 1993, p.91).
- Encouragement of super human efforts has huge implications. While the initial response appears to increase productivity, burnout is often just down the road. Ill-health, both physical and psychological, inability and/or unwillingness to perform to capacity, and a sense of abandonment by management have obvious consequences for the long term health of both the organization and its people.
- An insecure workforce whose job responsibilities are likely to burgeon may well foreshadow unfavorable consequences for the "bottom line." A more humane approach to managing downsizing has its rewards. Recognizing the impact on those who survive the layoffs, by providing avenues for realistic dialogue about the ensuing distrust and cynicism, may incline

those who remain to produce their best over the longer term.

Decentralization Should Not Be Synonymous with Downsizing

The true costs of reducing professional personnel at the district office have elicited little attention. "There may be hidden expenses (at school sites) to these political gestures" (Seller, 1995). The realities after downsizing are that the tasks still need to get done. In many resultant reconfigurations, decisions and responsibilities previously made at the central office level have been passed over to principals. Since it is impossible for one person to assume all these added tasks, site administrators have moved some of these onto administrative assistants and teachers. One of our major findings is that the workload for these site-based personnel has risen to a level which they consider detrimental to the core process of teaching and learning. The consequence to principals is that they are less instructional leaders and more bureaucratic managers.

Focus on Developing a Systemic Capacity

Developing a culture of dialogue and norms that involve representation from a broad base of stakeholders, should start in times of regular decision making. Thereafter, in times of crisis, the trust that has been developed around more routine issues will pay dividends when difficult decisions need to be made. An understanding of the larger context, already planned, will guide decision makers as they respond to partisan demands and political realities of the moment.

Districts must be scrupulous as they advocate for giving those closest to students greater decision making authority. Recreating central offices in each building could well divert personnel from their core function of teaching and learning. The shift, from the more "traditional" tight control of schools by a bureaucratic hierarchy, toward the more enlightened concept of site-based leadership is acknowledged by many to portend improved student outcomes. But care must be taken that this restructuring rests on a philosophical foundation. It can be a camouflage for reduction of support services which result from downsizing demands. Policies which undergird equity across schools need to be reaffirmed and revised to reflect the restructuring which is taking place. Schools are special places and looking to corporate models to "improve productivity," or allowing political exigencies to compromise organizational effectiveness, as our study districts have recognized, has long-term repercussions.

Finally, the martyrdom of people must be discouraged. Efforts to keep trying to carry it all are, over the long run, counterproductive. One "out of the box" strategy might be to let it all fall. Perhaps if educators let the organization implode, political power brokers would acknowledge the necessity of keeping it more than afloat.

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